

Robyn Walker, *The Women Who Spied for Britain: Female Secret Agents of the Second World War*. Stroud: Amberley, 2014. Notes. 188pp. ISBN 978-1-445602311-5 (Hardback). Price £16.99.

The preoccupation with the thirty-nine female agents of the Special Operations Executive's F Section, a British wartime department that recruited, trained and infiltrated personnel to work with the French resistance, continues with the publication of another popular history book that provides chapter-biographies of select female operatives. We read about Violette Szabo, Odette Sansom, Noor Inayat Khan, Christine Granville and Nancy Wake, who have each been the subject of two full-length biographies and whose stories have also all been told repeatedly in several other collections about female SOE agents. (See Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived For Danger*, 2002; Beryl Escott, *Mission Improbable*, 1991 and *The Heroines of SOE*, 2012; James Gleeson, *They Feared No Evil*, 1976; Liane Jones, *A Quiet Courage*, 1990; Rita Kramer, *Flames in the Field*, 1995; Elizabeth Nicholas, *Death Be Not Proud*, 1958.) Possibly less familiar are SOE agents Sonia Butt and Diana Rowden, although they too have featured in several of the above compilations. Given that the front cover invites us to 'meet some of the women whose bravery saved Britain', the inclusion of Mathilde Carré, a triple agent whose betrayal of her former Resistance colleagues led to her imprisonment by the British in 1942, is surprising. Moreover, she was not recruited, trained, paid nor run by SOE and, with a writing tone that is jarringly different, this chapter sits uneasily alongside those celebrating the SOE agents. There is no comment in the five-page Introduction chapter on why these women in particular were selected and the book lacks a conclusion chapter, ending very abruptly with mention of the death in 1988 of a wartime lover of one of the female agents.

The book is reliant on previously-published biographies and collections and there appears to be no new research undertaken in preparation for writing on what is very well-trodden ground. The title is somewhat misleading as by referring to 'women who spied for Britain' the implication is that these women were engaged in espionage, collecting intelligence against the Nazis. The dust jacket underscores this, mentioning that 'espionage is one of the world's oldest professions'. While Carré compiled intelligence reports to send to Britain, that was not the remit of the agents of the SOE, an organisation formed to incite acts of subversion and sabotage. These female agents were couriers and wireless operators, not spies. There is an unwarranted focus on the agents' physical appearance: three agents are described as 'beautiful' (p. 81, p. 123, p. 163), one as 'devastatingly beautiful' (p. 17) and 'stunningly beautiful' (p. 18) and 'one of the reasons [that another] was chosen as an agent was that she was a very attractive woman' (p. 93), while one was 'not a pretty girl' (p. 145), and another was 'not particularly attractive' (p. 108). More care was needed

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with the prose which is generally clunky: 'a French Jewess' (p. 34); 'she also served as Czerniawski's mistress' (p. 151) and the liberal use of exclamation marks lend a somewhat colloquial style to the writing. Despite the assertion that 'agents were usually dispatched to concentration camps where torture and execution were almost assured' (p. 26), mistreatment occurred during interrogations *prior* to deportation to camps and, of the 119 male and female agents sent to camps, over a fifth (23 men and 3 women) survived incarceration. The 'majority of French males' were not, as Walker states, 'conscripted into the German labour force' (p. 172), although a *Service de travail obligatoire*, a compulsory labour draft instituted in February 1943 to supply Germany with French workers, resulted in just under 800,000 Frenchmen being deported to Germany. And while 'The Germans quite often found someone of a prisoner's own nationality to commit the torture', it was not 'in the belief that the prisoner could then never say they had been tortured by the Germans' (p. 134) but rather because it was thought to lower the agent's morale which might lead to information. There are also some errors that good editing ought to have picked up on, such as the FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) being on one occasion wrongly called the Female Auxiliary Nursing Yeomanry (p. 126), and there is confusion over the date of D-Day (p. 29).

In short, Walker's book does not convince me that there is a need for another collection of chapter biographies on some of the female agents who have already been the subject of umpteen popular history books. Nevertheless, the potted biographies, with their descriptions of an incident involving two agents hoisting a training instructor's pants up a flagpole (p. 50), of one agent suspected of being the mistress of German officers narrowly escaping her head being shaved at the Liberation (p. 98) and being raped by two German soldiers (p. 100), and of the execution (p. 37, p. 118) and post-war murder (p. 181) of three of the selected agents, will provide those interested in the Second World War with, if not fresh research, certainly an engaging read.

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